



The Southeast Farallon is dominated by Tower Hill with the lighthouse rising atop it. This is the lee of the island and location of the south landing

OFFSHORE TO THE PACIFIC'S

FARALLON ISLANDS

"I've sailed past and around the Farallon islands plenty of times in 60 years of racing, cruising, and windjamming, but this is the first time I've ever wanted to get close enough to see the waves breaking on them," said the San Francisco Yacht Club's oldest member, Captain Leighton Robinson, as he stepped aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Willow.

Minutes later the Willow's gangway was up, and she was nosing out from her dock at Yerba Buena Island, in San Francisco Bay, on her weekly run to carry supplies and personnel to the rugged islands which are the mariner's doorstep to the Golden Gate.

We were the guests of the Coast Guard to visit this nautical outpost, graveyard of many a windjammer and steamer. Thirty-two miles offshore, it is also the objective of one of the Pacific Coast's toughest and most unpredictable yachting contests—the annual Farallones race.

It's a tradition of the Farallones race that you'll never know what the weather will be—and then it'll probably change. Our cruise in the Willow started right out in that

tradition. The air was still, with not a ripple on the water, as we slipped under the Oakland-San Francisco Bay bridge in the early morning, and the weatherman had predicted one of San Francisco's rare hot days.

The Willow's skipper, Lieutenant (S.G.) Alden E. Lewis, at that very moment, however, was reading a radioed report from the Farallones stating that winds were up to 35 m.p.h. and that the sea was running high enough to make landing precarious. Small craft warnings were also being hoisted for offshore.

"It's hard to believe," said Lewis as he surveyed the balmy morning, "but those fellows out there know what they're saying."

"Well, I've seen just the opposite, too," added "Cappy" Robinson, "it can blow great guns here on the bay and the minute you get outside the Gate the wind has died away to nothing."

"We'll take a chance on it," said Lewis. "We've got some mail to go aboard the lightship and only a few supplies for the Farallones so we won't have to be there long."

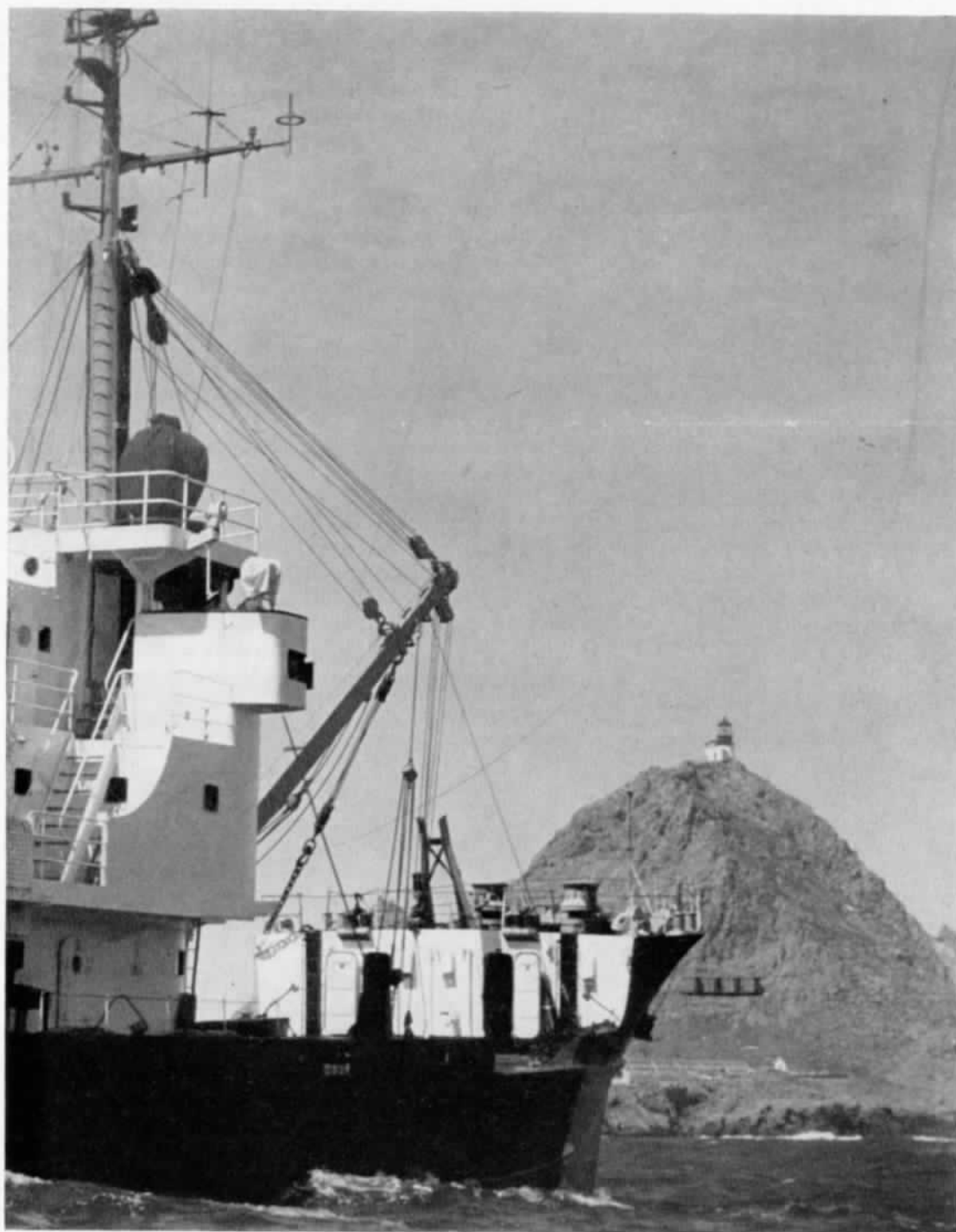
As the Willow passed Mile Rock to port and then Pt. Bonita to starboard she began to dig into the swell a bit, and on the wing of the bridge we fell to yarning about the Farallones race. The first recorded race to the Farallones was held in 1898, and the course was sailed at various intervals until it was abandoned from 1916 to 1930. The contest was revived in that year and again discontinued because of World War II, with the first post-war event held in 1946. The 1952 race to the islands is the 18th in the history of the contest.

"I sailed the old Athene, a gaff-rigger, in two of those early races," said Cappy. "We made it around the islands

and back the first time, but the second year I took her out she started leaking badly in a rough sea and we were forced to turn back before we'd gotten far offshore."

Athene, during her racing career, was said to have made the 54-mile minimum run around the Farallones in less than eight hours, which must have been with the benefit of a hooting wind. The big ketch Marilen won the race in 1938 in the fast time of 9 hours 36 minutes, and reported starting winds of 12 to 15 m.p.h. which freshened to 22 m.p.h. at the islands.

Not every Farallones contest has been marked by strong winds and high seas, however, and in recent years the race



The Cutter Willow runs close into shore to shorten the small boat's run to the landing and stay within the meager lee offered by the Southeast Farallon



*Photographs by
Melton Ferris*

Behind these jagged rocks of the Southeast Farallon lies the seldom used north landing of the island. Sea birds and sea lions, protected by law, make this their home

has been accompanied by light and contrary airs and long periods of calm, with elapsed times of more than 16 hours.

The race is customarily started at midnight off the St. Francis Yacht Club on the San Francisco Marina. At one time the Middle Farallon was used as the marker, but it proved hard to sight in fog and wind. Now the race is around the Southeast Farallon, which may be rounded from north or south as the contenders desire.

The Farallones roughly parallel the coast in a southeast-northwesterly direction, and are composed of the North and Southeast Farallones, with Four Mile Rock, also known as the Middle Farallon, located midway between the two.

Noonday Rock, 12½ feet underwater, marks the northernmost extremity of the submerged ridge which forms the islands. It is 11 miles from Noonday Rock to the Southeast Farallon.

The Cabrillo expedition discovered the islands in 1543, and Sir Francis Drake landed on them in 1577 from the Golden Hind, naming them the Islands of St. James. Other explorers of the Pacific lay to briefly off their hazardous shores, and in 1775 Bodega renamed the group Los Farallones de los Frailes, to honor the Franciscan fathers. Los Farallones was the word applied by Spanish mariners to small jagged islands.

The Willow had been moving (Continued on page 283)



The south landing has a surge which rises and falls five or six feet, keeping the coxswain on his toes. The crane drops the canvas "basket" to pick off passengers who are transferred to the landing "by air"

THE FARALLON ISLANDS

(Continued from page 64)

through the San Francisco bar channel at her 11-knot cruising speed as we talked, and by mid-morning the lightship which marks the seaward end of the channel was nearby.

Lewis eased Willow's bow up just astern and to leeward of the lightship, and a line was heaved aboard the anchored vessel to transfer the mail bag. The ship was the Relief, an old-timer which was on station while the modern San Francisco was in dry dock. Relief was flying a small craft warning as big as a bed sheet, although the wind was still around 15 m.p.h.

Lying 10 miles out from the coast, the lightship is the marker for another annual race, sponsored by the Aeolian Yacht Club. Winds for the Lightship race are usually more moderate than for the Farallones haul, and smaller yachts are eligible for the course. The prevailing summer wind usually provides a beat out and a pleasant spinnaker run back through the Gate.

Perfect Day for Racing

I remembered a brisk pre-war afternoon when Gordon Strawbridge, of the San Francisco Yacht Club, and I sailed his fast little Tumblaren sloop in the Lightship race. We were boosted to a win in our class as we ran with the parachute spinnaker lifting Sonja's bow and the giant swells through the channel giving her a surfboard ride until we were under the Golden Gate bridge. It was the perfect day for a light displacement boat.

Shortly before noon Willow was off the Southeast Farallon with one of her small boats lifted outboard on the davits in preparation for going ashore. The last miles to the island had produced seas that broke over the forecabin, and a wind that made the rigging strum. Now we moved into the meager lee of the main island, a mile long by a half-mile wide, which has the only habitation in the group. The rest of the islands are much smaller, measuring only yards across their greatest diameter.

To serve the light, which lifts on Tower Hill 358 feet above the water, the Coast Guard keeps a crew of 17 men on the island. A weather reporting station is also established there. During World War II the Navy manned the island installations. A lighthouse has been maintained on the Farallones since 1855.

No Place to Land

There is no place on the Farallones where a landing can be made directly from a boat except in the calmest weather, and supplies are lifted by crane from the ship's boat, with passengers taking an elevator ride to shore in a large canvas "basket."

A light motor launch is also kept at the station, and the crane can hoist boat, passengers and all, from the sea below and swing them onto the island. The south landing is used during the prevailing northwesterlies, with another landing on the north side of the island for use during the occasional blows from the south.

Perfect timing is required of the coxswain who must run his craft within a few feet of the rocks to get it under the crane's hook. The cargo net or the basket is quickly hooked on and hoisted away, and the small boat stands off the landing until the return load is ready to be dropped down.

We walked around the island to the north landing, following a tramline which links the two landings and is used for hauling supplies to the various buildings. The north side of the island is dominated by the second highest peak, called Main Top. The area is alive with sea birds, and sea lions roar and doze on the rocks.

The Farallones are the largest sea bird rookery on the Pacific coast, and in the days of the Gold Rush supported a brisk commercial trade in bird eggs which were sold in San Francisco at fabulous prices. Now the Farallones are one of four bird sanctuaries in California, with the bird population at its highest during the nesting months from May to July.

As we walked back to the south landing along the wave cut

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terrace we could see hundreds of rabbit holes, for the island swarms with hares. Quarters for the Coast Guardsmen and all buildings are on this terrace, 50 feet above the sea. It is the only relatively level bit of land on the island.

It was here the Russian fur-hunters and their Aleut Indian companions established themselves from 1806 to 1810, taking over 200,000 seals and nearly exterminating the seal population. The United States took possession of the islands in 1846.

There was no sign that the wind and swell had abated as we dropped in the basket to the Willow's boat, and spray was flying as we rounded the cutter's stern to hook onto the davits and be hoisted aboard.

Our run back to the coast was enlivened by numerous whales which blew and sounded with a flip of the tail, and occasionally leaped from the water, throwing tremendous splashes as they dropped back into the ocean.

The wind dropped gradually as we approached the Gate, and as we passed the buoys which mark the hulk of the sunken hospital ship Benevolence, the breeze was less than a whisper. Inside the heads San Francisco was sweltering, and it was already hard to remember that 30 miles offshore the wind was piping, the white-capped sea lay blue-black, and the gulls flew over los Farallones de los Frailes. MELTON FERRIS